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Hovering on the threshold? Tracking intentional and transitional behaviours at the Writing Cafe

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Pedagogic Research and Teaching Innovation (PRTI) Award

Final Report 2017

Name of key contact (project leader): Christie Pritchard

Department: Learning Development

Names of other staff involved: Helen Bowstead & Ben Brilot

Title of project: Hovering on the threshold? Tracking intentional and transitional behaviours at the Writing Café

Type of project: Action research

Keywords: Learning Spaces, Writing Café, Social Space, Analysing Thresholds, Engagement

Aims of project: To undertake an analysis of the threshold that surrounds the Writing Café and investigate how any barriers can be minimised in order to engender engagement with the support available.

The Writing Café provides an opportunity for staff and students to work together in a 'third space', breaking down social hierarchy and cultural boundaries, with a particular focus on those from widening participation backgrounds (Bhabha, 1994). It is a place where students on the periphery can engage with higher education, and thus it is vital that the space is clearly identifiable and the threshold is as inviting as possible in order to make sure that students can connect with the support available and engage with a community of practice (Kennedy, 1997, Wenger, 2000).

Background/context to project: Since opening in January 2014, the Writing Café at Plymouth University has become a popular space for students and staff to meet and discuss writing practices and gain support from the Learning Development team and trained student-writing mentors. Initial observations of visitors at the threshold of the Writing Café indicated that individuals display a range of behaviours when approaching the space, including directly or indirectly transitioning over the threshold, pausing, and pausing and returning the way they came. This project aimed to undertake an analysis of the behaviours displayed at the threshold that surrounds the space and investigate how any barriers can be minimised in order to engender engagement with the support available.

Methods used: The use of CCTV in public spaces is generally considered a nonthreatening activity in the UK (Norris, 2004) and this research project utilised video recording as a methodology as it offered a way of gathering data in a highly structured way, with minimal distribution to the visitors to the Writing Café. Additionally, it provided the opportunity of a non-instructive method of studying visitor's behaviours in a way that is replicable and with data that can be re-examined. By coding individual's behaviour into an ethogram we were able to analyse the behaviours exhibited

by participants of the Writing Café which were recorded on 3x CCTV cameras at different locations within the Writing Café.

CCTV cameras were installed at the periphery of the space's boundary and captured the behaviours of individuals as they came into contact with the Writing Café. Undergraduate students on the BSc Animal Behaviour and Welfare programme produced an ethogram to outline the behaviours and to score the footage using The Observer software.

Results: The analysis of data indicates there are areas in the Writing Café where interventions can be made to increase the visibility of the Writing Mentors and encourage participation in activities. The research team are considering finding suitable funding opportunities to gather a comparable data set after changes to the physical space have been made and interventions are introduced.

Associated publications: The research team are currently in the process of writing up the project for publication.

Dissemination: Due to the project leader undertaking maternity leave shortly after data collection the team have not yet disseminated the research. Also, they had to re-apply for ethical clearance as it had expired, which delayed the project on her return. Now the clearance has been extended and the team are back together, they are writing the research up for publication and will disseminate the project at the 2018 VC's teaching and learning conference and other appropriate conferences.